

My New Novel: Between Heaven and Earth - Book One: The Cost of Freedom - Prologue: A Man of the Cloth

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This novel, in many ways, represents the twenty years I've spent living in Korea. It is the story of Kim Jeong Sook, her escape from North Korea, her sojourn through China, arrival in South Korea, and return to her place of birth to rescue her father. In the end, she pursues her destiny and meets her fate. I cried often as I wrote this story and again when I read it out loud. My ambition is that it might move you to tears also.

The publishing game is a tough nut to crack. The Covid-19 pandemic only complicated my time line. Some of the most famous and influential authors-including Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dickens, Tolstoy, and Doestoevesky- first published their works in serial form in magazines. As an aspirant to such company the internet presents me with a similar opportunity and I've determined to jump off the cliff and see if I can grow some wings on the way down.

Book One: The Cost of Freedom
Michael P. Downey
Prologue: A Man of the Cloth

Kim Soo-Bom sat up on his futon and coughed. It was several hours before dawn and the air was a little cold. He was already dressed for the day

since he always slept in his clothes in the cool weather. His attire was an odd combination of traditional Korean and western clothes. He wore thermal underwear that he had picked up at a used clothing store. His traditional Korean hanbok, long baggy pants and a short jacket that crossed over and fastened in the front, was once white but was now dingy white, gray, and black in some places. He dressed not for success but for function and for his profession. Kim Soo Bom was a man of the cloth. In particular he was a shaman.

Upon rising he pulled on an old down vest, grabbed a rice ball left over from the day before and kicked on a pair of converse high tops at the door of the shack where he lived alone. Before starting out he pulled a wool U.S. Navy watch cap over his salt and pepper haired head. Finally he slung a canvas zippered bag over his shoulder.

Before starting up the mountain he paused and fished a semi crushed pack of Marlboro Reds out of a pocket in his vest. After firing up the first cigarette of the day, he inhaled deeply, coughed again, and surveyed the environment. At sixty something, no one could say for sure exactly when he had been born, he started his day just about the same way as he had started everyday for the past forty or more years.

As a shaman, moodang in the Korean language, he was a freelance provider of services. Although possibly the oldest religion both in Korea and around the world there was no organization, hierarchy, ordained clergy, or seminaries in Korean Shamanism. Instead the body of teachings and practice were passed down by word of mouth from one moodang to an acolyte. In Kim Soo Bom's case he had been recognized as a talented young man by a powerful woman shaman and taken under her wing. After a long and arduous apprenticeship he had struck out on his own forty years ago.

He started up the mountain just like he had done every morning since then; rain, shine, snow or oppressive heat. As mountains go it was not very high. It was the home of the mountain gods. He went there to commune with the spirits and practice his profession. Scattered across the granite outcroppings were various shrines where Korean people had been coming to worship the mountain spirits since before the advent of recorded history.

The mountain was one of the four that surrounded and guarded the city of Seoul. According to the ancient art of Feng-shui, it was one of the reasons that the city was located where it was. From its heights one could gaze down over the ancient city wall and down at Seoul. The financial district, the Blue House, the home of the president of the republic, the Bank of Korea, and the department stores and shopping areas of

Myung Dong were all laid out. Early in the morning and late at night, the worshipers at the mountain god shrines could see the bright lights illuminating the power centers of modern Korea. Kim Soo Bom knew that if the power brokers, business elite, and revelers ever looked up they would see the fires and votive lights of those seeking a much older form of power.

In the distance, South Mountain, with its television tower rising from the peak, was visible on clear days. Off to the west was a red brick complex of buildings known as West Gate Prison. Now a museum, it was where generations of dissidents, patriots and common criminals had been imprisoned, tortured, and executed. Sometimes Kim Soo Bom thought he could hear the pitiful moaning and screams of the inmates.

The mountain itself had been left outside the city's walls in a dispute between the Neo-Confucian and Buddhist advisers to the founding king of the last Korean dynasty. The Buddhists wanted to minimize the influence of shamanism on the new nation. In Kim Soo Bom's view, the mountain gods held as much sway as ever. The doctrinal and financial struggles between the practitioners of shamanism and the followers of the Gautama had continued for as long as anyone could remember. Although the foreign religion had made many gains over the centuries, the home grown way had assimilated, ducked and covered, and survived until now. The common Korean people embraced the public face of the monks from the west, and now a days the priests from even farther away, but they often turned to the moodang in times of personal crisis. Kim Soo Bom had job security.

His first stop up the mountain was the shrine of the Dragon God. He ducked into the cave-like alcove formed by natural granite formations. In this shrine there was running water, appropriate to a shrine of the god of all moving water. He scooped up the ice cold clear water with his hands and washed his face and scraggly beard. Morning absolutions done, he sat cross-legged in front of the low stone altar. On the altar were two half full bottles of soju that someone had reverently left as offerings to the deity. He finished them both off with the rice ball he had brought. It was a fine breakfast. Next he lit two candles and bowed to the Dragon God thanking him for his continued effort to bring the life giving waters to all, regardless of high or low born.

As he walked up the trail to the next shrine he stopped for a moment and looked behind him to the east. There was a noticeable lightening of the sky where the sun would rise. The huge standing rock in front of him was one of the mysteries of this mountain. There were numerous granite outcroppings all over but this mammoth rock was clearly of volcanic origin. The nearest volcanoes were hundreds of kilometers to the north and to the south. How did it get here? No one knew. At the shrine in front of Son Ba We, the name the rock had come to be known as, there was a painted wooden deck and banks of votive candles. Even before dawn there were three middle-aged Korean women bowing and petitioning the god of the rock. This rock was the embodiment of the old man of the mountain sometimes portrayed as a tiger. On the altar were the standard offerings of soju and rice. Kim Soo Bom greeted the old man bowing twice, lit two candles, and continued on his way.

Up and up he walked in the cool fresh morning air. It was early November and he was sure the rising sun would soon begin to warm the air. By the early afternoon he knew it would warm his bones and the changing colors of the leaves would warm his heart. He came to his place and sat down on the rock. He looked down at the city and up at the sun rising in the east.

After a time of compilation he began his deep breathing practice. After reaching the point where he could feel the Ki energy he stood up and began to move. His practice had been learned in his youth and had been handed down by the masters. Now days he had his own routine developed through his years of daily practice. The key was breathing. By controlling his breathing he sought to control the Ki energy throughout his body. With the slow movement of his body synchronized with the breathing, he moved the Ki throughout his body. After awhile all conscious thought faded away and he only felt the moving energy. He entered into a state of profound ecstasy as his rhythmic movements became a kind of graceful dance. Time stood still as he danced and absorbed the power of life from the universe. When he again sat down he was in a deep state of contentment. He gazed again at the city and imagined the people going about their daily lives and felt vindicated in his life. He felt once more that his vocation was to connect these common folks with their common problems to the source of life.

He looked to the ridge off to the north and the barbed wired ROK Army encampment that was guarding the approaches to the Blue House. It was a constant reminder to him of the tragic division of the peninsula and his people. He had been born sometime after the war and the permanent division of the two Koreas. Before he died he longed for an end of the separation of the land and his people. In his mind, such things were up to Heaven. It occurred to him that Heaven's work on the earth must surely be our own. He looked at the city again and wondered how this would play out.